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ABSTRACT

Examined was the effect of the establishment of mini-courses on student attitudes in a small rural high schcol setting. All students in grades 9-12 were given the School Sentiment Index (SSI) and the Subject Area Preference (SAP) in the early fall and near the end of the school year. Completed by 205 students (118 boys and 87 girls), the SSI measured student attitudes toward 7 dimensions of school and school life--teachers' mode of instruction, authority and control, and interpersonal relationships; learning; school social structure; peers; and school in general. Completed by 220 students (117 boys and 103 girls), the SAP elicited student attitudes toward English, mathematics, social studies, foreign language, fine arts-music, vocational education, science, and physical education. The statistical procedure used was the t-test for correlated means. Since the program objectives predicted growth in the major construct dimension, the one-tailed test was employed. Differences in total group means for each of the scales and sub-scales were analyzed for significance. Boys' and girls' scores were also examined to determine attitudinal growth by sex. Findings included: there was positive attitude growth in regard to teaching methods, English, physical education, and vocational education; boys' attitudes increased significantly in English, physical education, and fine arts-music; boys scored higher in physical education and vocational education and girls in English. (NQ)

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MINI-COURSES AND STUDENT ATTITUDE IN THE SMALL RURAL HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract

This research investigated the effect of the establishment of mini-courses on student attitudes: a small rural high school setting. Positive attitude growth was evidenced in regard to teaching methods, English, physical education and vocational education.

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It has been recognized that the small rural high school has several advantages which can make it an extremely effective center for learning. Yet, in most instances, this potential has not been developed because the size has not been used to advantage. A Washington state study concluded that the frequent opportunities for interaction among teachers, students, and parents were not utilized to offer imaginative programs for the education of rural youth.

> Rather than taking advantage of the potential that exists here, the small high schools appear to be imitating traditional patterns of program organization and staff utilization. Such programs were discarded by the fine large high schools decades ago.[1]

The staff of a high school of 250 students in east-central South Dakota began looking for an approach to take better advantage of the small enrollment, while overcoming the critical weakness of a limited curriculum. There was a desire to develop an expanded curriculum which would more adequately meet the variety of educational needs and interests of the student body. Also, it was determined that the organizational pattern should provide the student and parent with the opportunity for increased involvement in the structuring of the student's educational program. The mini-course approach was considered to meet these criteria.

It was assumed the mini-courses would lead to an improved learning atmosphere reflected in the students' attitude toward school and school subjects. Although research is limited as to the effect of mini-courses on student attitudes, the indications are positive. Morton and Dei Dolori reported that students involved in mini-courses in English and social studies at Granby (Connecticut) High School were overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Also, experienced teachers reported

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[1]Paul Ford, Herbert Hite, and Norman Koch. Remote High Schools: The Realities. Portland, Oregon: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1967. pp. 35.

that discipline problems were greatly diminished due to increased student interest.[2] Kohut found that students enrolled in a mini-course social studies curriculum showed a significant improvement in attitude toward the teachers' performance and the social studies course in comparison with the students enrolled in a traditional program.[3] Roberts and Gable did not find a significant increase in either motivation toward education or attitudes toward social studies among those students enrolled in a mini-course curriculum, but the students were found to have better attitudes toward their teachers.[4]

In the present program, a variety of innovations were tested, aiming toward a full quarter-course curriculum the following year. Quarter courses were developed in home economics, business education, and industrial arts. Physical education introduced the unit approach which was easily broken into separate quarter courses. The English department instituted a complete mini-course curriculum which allowed the student to choose from approximately sixteen separate courses every six weeks. Individual teachers in mathematics, social studies, and biology incorporated learning packets, contracts, and other individualized approaches into their regular programs. The result was a relaxing of the formal structure of the school and the opportunity for increased choice on the part of the students.

To assess the impact of these innovations, it was decided to measure student attitude toward school and school subjects using a pre and post-test design.

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[2]Thomas H. Morton and Mario P. Dei Dolori. "An Electives Program in a Small High School? It Works!" English Journal. October, 1971, pp. 952-56.

[3]Sylvester Kohut, Jr., "Mini-Courses in the Hign School Social Studies Curriculum." The Social Studies. April, 1973. pp. 169-71.

[4]Arthur D. Roberts and Robert K. Gable. "Mini Versus Traditional: An Experimental Study of High School Social Studies Curricula. Paper presented at the National Council for the Social Studies 52nd Annual Meeting. Boston, Massachusetts. November, 1972.

Method

Instruments

The instruments used in this study were the School Sentiment Index (SSI) and the Subject Area Preference (SAP). Both instruments were developed by the Instructional Objectives Exchange at the UCLA Center for the Study of Evaluation.[5]

SSI. The SSI is a direct self report test designed to measure attitude toward several dimensions of school and school life. The instrument contains 82 items, and the responses deal with seven attitudinal dimensions or subscales: (a) Teacher; Mode of Instruction, (b) Teacher; Authority and Control, (c) Teacher; Interpersonal Relationships, (d) Learning, (e) School Social Structure, (f) Peers, (g) School in General. The Composite score provides an eighth dimension, a global estimate of school sentiment. Reported internal consistency coefficients ranged from .68 to .79 for the subscales with a coefficient of .88 for the composite score.[6] The present investigation revealed an index of .89 for the composite score.

SAP. The SAP is a self report device designed to elicit the student's attitude toward specific subject areas. The instrument contains 48 items dealing with eight subject areas: (a) English, (b) mathematics, (c) social studies, (d) foreign language, (e) fine arts-music, (f) vocational education, (g) science, (h) physical education. Test-retest stability coefficients ranging from .76 to .84 were reported for the eight subscales.[7]

Procedures

Subjects. The subjects for this study consisted of all students in grades

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[5]IOX. Attitude Toward School. Los Angeles, California: The Instructional Objectives Exchange, 1972.

[6]W. J. Popham. "Empirically Based Revision of Affective Measuring Instruments." Paper presented at the California Educational Research Convention. San Jose, California. November 8-9, 1972.

[7]Ibid.

9-12 who participated in both the pre and post-testing sessions. The SSI was completed by 205 students (118 boys and 87 girls) and the SAP by 220 students (117 boys and 103 girls). The instruments were administered in the early fall and near the end of the school year.

Analysis of the data. The statistical procedure used in the study was the t-test for correlated means (related t-test). Since the program objectives predicted growth in the major construct dimension, the one-tailed test was employed. The differences in total group means for each of the scales and subscales were analysed for significance. Boys' and girls' scores were also examined to determined attitudinal growth by sex.

Results

The inferences that can be drawn from the collected data are as follows:

1. The analysis of the SSI scores showed an overall increase in the subscales Teacher; Authority and Control and Learning at the .05 level of significance. It can be further noted that the increases in the boys' scores paralleled that of all students. Increases in the dimension Teacher; Authority and Control exceeded the .05 level, while growth in the attitude score Learning exceeded the .01 probability level. The increase in the attitude scores of the girls was not significant.

2. A significant improvement in student attitudes toward English (p=.01), physical education (p=.01), and vocational education (p=.10) was found. Even though a number of approaches were used to meet individual student needs, only in those subject areas using the mini-course approach were significant overall improvements in student attitudes effected.

The attitude scores of the boys increased significantly in English (p=.05), physical education (p=.01), and fine arts-music* (p=.05). The girls' attitude

*In the writers' opinion, the main factor in the increase in the boys' attitude toward fine arts-music was the addition of a competent female vocal music teacher to the staff.

scores manifested significant increases in English (p=.01), vocational education (p=.05), and physical education (p=.01). Also, in each of the three subject areas showing a significant overall increase, one of the sex groups demonstrated a more positive attitude as indicated by examination of the pretest means. The boys scored higher in physical education and vocational education and the girls in English. In each case, the sex group having the least positive feelings showed a significant increase in attitude toward the subject area.

Conclusions

1. The relaxing of the formal school structure may have been the major factor in the increase in the change in attitude--primarily the boys--toward teacher authority and control and learning. This may be because many boys, due to peer pressure, societal attitudes, and/or early school experiences, tend to view learning as a feminine activity.[8] These boys may have perceived an increased opportunity to determine their own destiny as the "control over" atmosphere diminished. They viewed learning as a more manly activity, resulting in the growth in attitude.

Such a conclusion is supported by the findings that the development of self-identity is vital to the maturation process. If the student can gain self-respect by being actively involved in the determination of his educational program the need to rebel against adult authority is lessened and his energies can be channeled in more constructive directions.

2. The utilization of mini-courses may well have had a positive effect on student attitudes toward the subject areas. Such a conclusion is supported by the findings of Morton, Dei Doroli, and Kohut. The elimination of redundancy and the opportunity to study in the student's area of interest can be important influences in the increased attitudes.

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[8] P. C. Sexton. The Feminized Male. New York: Vintage Books, 1969.

Also, mini-courses may be useful in lessening the problem of sex group identification with certain subject areas in our schools. If a student fails to enroll in a course because it is identified as a "boys' course" or a "girls' course," the chance for a valuable learning experience may have been missed. For example, knowledge and skills in home economics and industrial arts can be of great benefit to members of either sex. Yet courses in these areas are primarily taken by members of only one sex group. No part of the curriculum should be closed to any student if educators are truly committed to developing broadly educated and self-sufficient individuals. Such conclusions should be considered by teachers and administrators as they contemplate changes in their school programs.

3. The findings in this study, while significant, are not conclusive and research in a wide variety of school situations needs to be conducted. Additional study on the effect of relaxed structure and mini-courses on actural learning is badly needed.

TABLE 1

MEANS AND t DIFFERENCES FOR THE SCHOOL SENTIMENT INDEX

(TOTAL N=205, BOYS N=117, GIRLS N=87)

Subscale		Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	t
Teacher Mode of Instruction	Total	38.922	38.970	0.14
	Boys	38.619	38.864	0.51
	Girls	39.333	39.115	-0.47
Authority and Control	Total	25.780	26.283	1.86**
	Boys	25.424	26.034	1.68**
	Girls	26.264	26.621	0.88
Interpersonal Relationships	Total	30.166	29.580	-1.78
	Boys	29.873	29.754	-0.26
	Girls	30.563	29.345	-2.58
Learning	Total	27.576	28.044	2.07**
	Boys	26.796	27.602	2.69***
	Girls	28.632	28.644	0.03
Social Structure	Total	38.239	38.278	0.12
	Boys	37.449	37.636	0.45
	Girls	39.310	39.149	-0.30
Peer	Total	22.454	22.522	0.33
	Boys	22.492	22.449	-0.16
	Girls	22.402	22.621	0.70
General	Total	29.732	30.039	1.09
	Boys	29.017	29.280	0.66
	Girls	30.701	31.069	0.95
Composite	Total	212.868	213.717	0.65
	Boys	209.669	211.619	1.14
	Girls	217.206	216.563	-0.31

**Significance at the .05 level with 204 df=1.65, 117 df=1.66, 86 df=1.67
***Significance at the .01 level with 204 df=2.34, 117 df=2.36, 86 df=2.37

TABLE 2

MEANS AND t DIFFERENCES FOR THE SUBJECT AREA PREFERENCE SCALE

(TOTAL N=220, BOYS N=117, GIRLS N=103)

Subject Area		Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	t
English	Total	27.041	28.355	3.04***
	Boys	25.598	26.761	1.87**
	Girls	28.679	30.165	2.50***
Mathematics	Total	28.200	27.718	-1.04
	Boys	28.162	27.427	-1.08
	Girls	28.243	28.049	- .31
Social Studies	Total	26.105	25.105	-2.09
	Boys	24.872	23.650	-1.82
	Girls	27.505	26.757	-1.10
Foreign Language	Total	24.105	24.027	-0.18
	Boys	22.974	22.479	- .78
	Girls	25.388	25.786	.67
Fine Arts - Music	Total	27.995	28.500	1.10
	Boys	26.943	27.179	1.86**
	Girls	30.214	30.000	- .31
Vocational Education	Total	30.309	30.986	1.39*
	Boys	30.855	31.094	.35
	Girls	29.689	30.864	1.72**
Science	Total	28.636	27.900	-1.45
	Boys	28.444	27.376	-1.52
	Girls	28.854	28.495	- .49
Physical Education	Total	30.582	32.577	3.87***
	Boys	31.513	33.359	2.50***
	Girls	29.524	31.689	3.03***
Composite	Total	222.973	225.168	1.04
	Boys	218.462	219.325	.30
	Girls	228.097	231.806	1.20

*Significance at the .10 level with 219 df=1.29, 116 df=1.29, 102 df=1.29
**Significance at the .05 level with 219 df=1.65, 116 df=1.66, 102 df=1.66
***Significance at the .01 level with 219 df=2.34, 116 df=2.35, 102 df=2.35